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SUBJECT: IRANIAN DIPLOMAT CONFRONTS CONOFF AT JEDDAH
GATHERING

REF: JEDDAH 000211

Classified By: Tatiana C. Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a recent gathering at the home of a prominent Saudi businessman, the Iranian ambassador to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Mohammed Kazem Khawansari, confronted Conoff after he was seated near him by the host. Khawansari discussed the recent publication of an academic paper from Harvard University criticizing the influence of the Israel lobby on US foreign policy, and when prodded to shake Conoff's hand and "be friends" by the event's host, began railing against his perception of the USG's bellicose stance toward his country. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) Construction magnate Abdelmaksoud Khojah hosted one of his weekly "Ithnainiyas" (salons) on March 27 attended by Conoff and approximately 150 businessmen, intellectuals, and civil servants from Jeddah (see reftel). Following the conclusion of the formal part of the event, Khojah insisted that Conoff eat dinner at the head table and seated him to the right of the Consul General of Morocco, Mohamed Abdouh Aimane. After chatting for several minutes, Aimane turned to the gentleman to his left, who was dressed in the traditional robe and headdress of a Shi'a cleric. Assuming he was Saudi, numerous attendees had remarked earlier in the evening that the gentleman's presence illustrated the cautious tolerance growing in the Kingdom since King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 2005. However, as the Moroccan CG drew Conoff into his conversation, he was introduced as the Iranian ambassador to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Mohammed Kazem Khawansari.

¶3. (C) Refusing to address Conoff directly and instead referring to him in the third-person while shooting the occasional angry glance, Khawansari began describing an academic paper recently released at Harvard University that criticized the disproportionate influence of the Israel lobby in the US foreign policy process. (NOTE: The paper, "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy," was published on March 16 as part of the Kennedy School of Government's faculty working paper series. It was written by Harvard's Stephen Walt and the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer.) According to Khawansari, the paper described the lobby's influence as "dangerous" to US security. When Aimane asked Khawansari if he could speak English to facilitate conversation with Conoff, Khawansari replied simply in Arabic, "I do, but I won't." Conoff's only participation in

the conversation was to say that the publication of the working paper demonstrated the diversity of opinion and the protection of free expression in the US.

14. (C) As Conoff was leaving the dinner and saying good-bye to the host, Khojah pulled him and Khawansari together a second time to walk them to their cars. Approaching the Iranian envoy's vehicle, Khojah, who was standing between both men, put his arm around them and said in Arabic, "Why don't you shake hands and be friends?" The already agitated Khawansari then became enraged and immediately launched into an assault on US policy in the region (including references to a US invasion of Iran), not all of which Conoff was able to understand. The ever-jovial Khojah simply chuckled as Khawansari stormed off to his car.
Gfoeller